

Healing from and Preventing the Damage of Microaggressions

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While most of the literature on microaggressions discusses how to manage them in the moment, and what kinds of responses might communicate the inappropriateness of the behavior, few are devoted to the question of reversing the damage from stress that results. Chronic (ongoing) stress devastates wellness. It's also cumulative in that the damage worsens with every microaggressive blow. Constant putdowns, ridicule and denigrations, intended or not, have measurable adverse effects on your body, mind and self-definition.

Psychologist Derald Wing Sue defines [microaggressions](#) as the “everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership.” Microaggressions can be racial, gender-based, hetero-patriarchal, religious, fat phobic, ageist, ableist or any other dynamic that marginalizes.

Microaggressions can invoke the stress reaction for those of us on the butt end of them. Hence I approach the question of healing and preventing them as primarily a matter of building resiliency. That is what this short article will focus on as I share some key ideas from my self-healing workshops.

In my framework of knowing, social justice and equity struggles benefit when every one of us is well, although not in the sense of some static state of perfect health where you can live forever. Healing is about the capacity to adjust, learn and grow in response to the ebb and flow of your dynamic relationships with the world. Your body, for example, is never static. If it were you'd be dead. In a healthy (or even unhealthy) body there are ongoing activities of self-regulation and self-repair in a process called homeostasis, which is the body's tendency to maintain optimal functioning. Healing and wellness in this article are essentially about self-love, self-compassion, and cultivating meaningful, fulfilling relationships rather than obtaining perfection in any form. From this perspective acceptance, inner peace, fulfillment and a sense of purpose are intrinsic to wellbeing.

Most folks know from high school science or popular culture that stress is at the root of many illnesses. Instead of glossing over the impact of microaggressive stress, here are some facts you might like to be aware of:

- When you are upset by a microaggression high levels of cortisol and adrenaline flood your bloodstream, increasing your respiration and blood pressure.
- Oxygen and blood are directed to your large muscles and physical senses (sight, hearing, etc.).
- Digestive organs slow down their activities. Nutrients don't get into the bloodstream and toxins don't get out of the body at optimum speeds.
- The immune reaction is put on hold.

- Your cells and the DNA within them contract, making them less able to absorb nutrients and perform all their functions.
- Your blood flow is diverted to the limbic/instinctive brain. The brain areas responsible for higher thinking get less blood, oxygen and nutrients. Your body does this as part of a stress reaction because you don't need to be philosophizing or contemplating your next art project when you're in a crisis or life-threatening situation.

This fight or flight state is exactly what you need if you're in a situation where your life or the wellbeing of a loved one is at risk. You don't, however, want to live in this state. Here are some other effects of chronic (long term) stress, which repeated exposure to microaggressions provokes:

- Your body doesn't care whether the experience is life threatening or mildly annoying. Whether you have a gun pointed at you or your coworker uttered a careless remark, your body reacts the same way.
- Furthermore, your body doesn't care whether your stress is life threatening in that moment, you are remembering stressful events from the past or imagining them in the future.
- The more often or more prolonged the microaggression, the more your brain will physically restructure itself to accommodate the biochemistry and neural activity of chronic stress. For example, blood vessels, cellular growth and synaptic (communication) pathways in the brain will develop in ways that help you shift into the stress reaction quicker and allow you to stay there longer.
- High levels of cortisol will dissolve connective tissue such as ligaments, tendons and cartilage. Cortisol will also contribute to the accumulation of belly fat.
- The adrenal gland will get tired of pumping adrenaline into your system. Adrenal exhaustion will set in and you will likely feel a sense of numbness and resignation to stressful events because you won't have enough adrenaline in your system to generate useful responses. So when you're faced with a real crisis you won't have the juice to react appropriately.
- Over the long term stress makes you more sensitive to physical pain.
- Your mental capacities will be compromised - particularly memory, learning, creativity and problem solving. Anyone who spends a lot of time in a context where microaggressions are rampant will have a brain that is very good at directing the biochemistry of stress; your thoughts become distrustful, self involved, fearful, anxious and intolerant.
- Your brain changes even further to accommodate what you think, say and do. If your attention remains on the multitude of microaggressions to which you are daily exposed your brain will accommodate and heighten the stress they cause.

The long-term effects of chronic and cumulative stress are not pretty. The Institute of HeartMath finds that a mere five minutes of being in a stressful state catalyzes six hours of depressed immunity, impaired healing and constrained mental capacity.

Microaggressions are potentially life threatening because they produce the stress that causes illness and shortens lifespans. This is why educational and awareness-raising strategies are important to prevent them. However, these are not the only strategies that contribute to prevention.

The literature on countering or preventing harmful stress often focuses on how individuals can build resiliency to offset the negative health effects. Most of this is aimed at helping you transform your behaviours and thinking patterns; modifying your reaction to stressful events in a process of building resiliency. This works because it reshapes your body into a more expansive state (literally).

While social justice emphasizes working collectively to promote social change, there is still a role for building individual (and group) resilience. In fact they are interdependent. Building resiliency is personally empowering, is the most effective method for transforming the impact of stress on your body, and enhances your capacity to sustain your participation in social change activities.

Resilient people are less likely to experience burn out, compassion fatigue or chronic stress symptoms. Obviously, social justice movements can benefit from resilient activists. That's why I emphasize building resiliency in my work.

Briefly, here's what happens to your body when you're resilient; when you're enjoying expansive states of love, compassion, generosity, gratitude and optimism.

- The higher thinking parts of your brain get an optimal amount of blood supply, oxygen and nutrients. There is more cell growth and synaptic activity. Consequently your memory, learning, problem solving and creative abilities expand.
- Biochemicals like DHEA, serotonin, oxytocin and nitrous oxide pour into your bloodstream. Combined these biochemicals promote feelings of connection, joy, openness, optimism, empathy, compassion, gratitude, generosity and a sense of peace. At their height you experience wonder and awe.
- These expansive states promote pro-social behaviours like cooperation, sharing, kindness, volunteering, giving and uplifting others. They fuel a thirst for social justice and equity.
- The longer you're in an expansive state, the more you produce biochemicals that heighten the effect and you can go into an upward spiral.
- As an added bonus, some of the biochemicals produced in expansive states lower cortisol levels, reversing the stress reaction.
- Your immune response becomes more efficient and tissue repair is accelerated. You also experience less physical pain.
- Organs, cells and DNA expand and become optimized for their functions, including taking in and metabolizing nutrients.

The HeartMath on expansive states? Five minutes buys you five hours of all these positive mental and physical benefits. When you cultivate expansive feelings you take advantage of your body's ability to restructure itself in the direction of building resiliency. This means you are less likely to be impacted by stressful events like microaggressions and, when you are, you can bounce back quicker.

Building resilience involves developing a daily practice of cultivating expansive mind, body and emotional states. This involves deliberately allocating time to focus on whatever puts you into an expansive mindset. Fortunately, as noted before, your body doesn't care whether you're actually lying on that beach, remembering or fantasizing about it. The benefits are the same.

The most effective way to build resilience is to strengthen your internal resources. While there's nothing wrong with experiencing pleasure from external sources, and these activities can definitely be fun, research increasingly shows they are not the most effective forms of building resiliency. Activities that help us feel connected, or provide opportunities to nurture life have deeper more lasting benefits than spa days, shopping sprees or getting that promotion. Do you want your happiness to depend on weather conditions, other people's moods or stuff you can't control? For a FREE [Tips on Building Resiliency](#) resource check out my site. (www.swallowsongs.com/publications/)

A note of caution on building resiliency to heal and prevent the stress of microaggressions: expecting to remain in a blissful state 24/7 is neither possible nor desirable. Anger, fear and grief, for instance, are appropriate responses to some life events. Ignoring, denying or suppressing them is as stressful as the event itself. Feel your feelings, explore and let them go. It's a refusal to process uncomfortable emotions that contributes to illness and mental contractiveness. When you notice, accept and explore your feelings they eventually fade and you can shift your attention to something more expansive. Yes contractive feelings will return because you're interacting with life and challenge is part of the deal. However, resiliency will allow you to manage life's challenges in a way that doesn't compromise your wellness.

Since community wellness and social justice depend on the contributions of resilient individuals, it's really about time that our movements, organizations and communities recognized resiliency-building as socially significant work. You might start out building resiliency for the sake of your own wellbeing but it will be the collective "us" that benefits.

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Based in peri-apocalyptic Toronto, Zainab Amadahy is an author, screenwriter, self-empowerment facilitator, professional development consultant, researcher and educator. Her background in medical and photovoltaic technologies, as well as community service in the areas of Indigenous knowledge reclamation, *curanderismo*, non-profit housing, women's services, migrant settlement and community arts, inform her work. Links to Zainab's articles, essays and other literary work can be found on her [website](#). www.swallowsongs.com.